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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 144-147

Published by: [American Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/419922>

Accessed: 25/02/2013 08:04

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# Toward Better Theories of the Policy Process

## Political Science and Public Policy

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Political scientists who are policy scholars often trace their lineage back to the pioneering work of Lerner and Lasswell (1951). But public policy did not emerge as a significant subfield within the discipline of political science until the late 1960s or early 70s. This resulted from at least three important stimuli: (1) social and political pressures to apply the profession's accumulated knowledge to the pressing social problems of racial discrimination, poverty, the arms race, and environmental pollution; (2) the challenge posed by Dawson and Robinson (1963), who argued that governmental policy decisions were less the result of traditional disciplinary concerns such as public opinion and party composition than of socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and unemployment levels; and (3) the efforts of David Easton, whose *Systems Analysis of Political Life* (1965) provided an intellectual framework for understanding the entire policy process, from demand articulation through policy formulation and implementation, to feedback effects on society.

Over the past twenty years, policy research by political scientists can be divided into four types, depending upon the principal focus:

1. *Substantive area research.* This seeks to understand the politics of a specific policy area, such as health, education, transportation, natural resources, or foreign policy. Most of the work in this tradition has consisted of detailed, largely atheoretical, case studies. Examples would include the work of Derthick (1979) on social security, Moynihan (1970) on anti-poverty programs, and Bailey and Mosher (1968) on federal aid to education. Such studies are useful to practitioners and policy activists

in these areas, as well as providing potentially useful information for inductive theory building. In terms of the profession as a whole, however, they are probably less useful than theoretical case studies—such as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) on implementation or Nelson (1984) on agenda-setting—which use a specific case to illustrate or test theories of important aspects of the policy process.

2. *Evaluation and impact studies.* Most evaluation research is based on contributions from other disciplines, particularly welfare economics (Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978; Jenkins-Smith 1990). Policy scholars trained as political scientists have made several contributions. They have broadened the criteria of evaluation from traditional social welfare functions to include process criteria, such as opportunities for effective citizen participation (Pierce and Doerkson, 1976). They have focused attention on distributional effects (MacRae, 1989). They have criticized traditional techniques of benefit-cost analysis on many grounds (Meier, 1984; MacRae and Whittington, 1988). Most importantly, they have integrated evaluation studies into research on the policy process by examining the use and non-use of policy analysis in the real world (Wildavsky, 1966; Dunn, 1980; Weiss, 1977).

3. *Policy process.* Two decades ago, both Ranney (1968) and Sharkansky (1970) urged political scientists interested in public policy to focus on the policy process, i.e. the factors affecting policy formulation and implementation, as well as the subsequent effects of policy. In their view, focusing on substantive policy

areas risked falling into the relatively fruitless realm of atheoretical case studies, while evaluation research offered little promise for a discipline without clear normative standards of good policy. A focus on the policy process would provide opportunities for applying and integrating the discipline's accumulated knowledge concerning political behavior in various institutional settings. That advice was remarkably prescient; the first paper in this symposium attempts to summarize what has been learned.

4. *Policy design.* With roots in the policy sciences tradition described by deLeon (1988), this approach has recently focused on such topics as the efficacy of different types of policy instruments (Salamon 1989; Linder and Peters 1989). Although some scholars within this orientation propose a quite radical departure from the behavioral traditions of the discipline (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987), others build upon work by policy-oriented political scientists over the past twenty years (Schneider and Ingram 1990) while Miller (1989) seeks to integrate political philosophy and the behavioral sciences.

While all have made some contributions, the third has been the most fruitful.

Before turning to a preview of the symposium, some mention should be made of tensions that have emerged between political scientists and the subfield of policy scholars.

### Sources of Strain

The first, and most subtle, concerns a difference in the fundamental conception of the purpose of government and political life (Hofferbert 1986). Virtually all policy scholars

view government in *instrumental* terms: Governments are there to improve the welfare of members of society—to protect public health, provide for the common defense, correct externalities and other market failures, improve public safety, etc. Many political scientists are uncomfortable with this view. Having been schooled in Plato, Aristotle, Locke, and Mill, there is a tendency to view citizenship and political participation as ends in themselves rather than as a means of influencing policy decisions.

Fortunately, this strain need not be serious. Policy scholars can certainly acknowledge the value of solidary incentives and a sense of political efficacy arising from political participation, even if these topics hold no intrinsic interest for them. Likewise most political scientists would admit that people participate in political life at least in part to influence governmental decisions and ultimately improve social welfare. Thus both sides should be able to agree on the importance of developing theories of the policy process which focus on ascertaining the factors which affect the extent to which governmental policy decisions and their social effects are consistent with popular preferences. This is, in fact, a well-established tradition within many subfields of political science, including public opinion (Luttbeg 1968; Page and Shapiro 1983), legislative representation (Miller and Stokes 1963; Ingram et al. 1980), and administrative agencies (Meier 1975; 1987).

The second strain also involves a difference in normative assumptions which need not impede close relations. Most policy scholars have an activist bent, i.e. at some point they wish to influence policy in the area(s) in which they are specialists. Conversely, political scientists probably tend to be preoccupied with better understanding the way the world operates within their areas of specialization, with a smaller percentage seeking to use their expertise to influence political behavior. That percentage, however, is far from trivial: Henry Kissinger and Jeane Kirkpatrick are obvious exceptions, while voting scholars often serve as campaign consultants and many other political scientists have sought to

improve the performance of various governmental institutions (Huntington 1988).

The third, and probably most serious, source of strain is that, in the eyes of many political scientists, policy scholars have made only modest contributions to developing reasonably clear, generalizable, and empirically verified theories of the policy process. See, for example, Eulau (1977) and Landau (1977), as well as the relatively poor performance of policy proposals in NSF's Political Science Program (Sigelman and Scioli 1987). In some respects, this indictment strikes me as quite valid. Much of what passes as policy research—particularly by substantive area specialists—shares all the defects of traditional case studies in public administration: descriptive analyses of specific institutions or decisions relying upon very subjective methods of data acquisition and analysis, virtually no attention to the theoretical assumptions underlying the research or the theoretical implications of the findings, and very little concern with the potential generalizability of those findings.

In addition, the dominant paradigm of the policy process—the stages heuristic of Jones (1970), Anderson (1975), and Peters (1986)—is not really a causal theory. Instead, it divides the policy process into several stages (agenda setting, formulation and adoption, implementation, and evaluation), but contains no coherent assumptions about what forces are driving the process from stage to stage and very few falsifiable hypotheses.<sup>1</sup> While the stages heuristic has helped to divide the policy process into manageable units of analysis, researchers have tended to focus exclusively on a single stage with little recognition of work in other stages. The result is weakened theoretical coherence across stages. Even within stages, such as implementation, where there has been a great deal of empirical research, disagreement exists as to how much has been learned over the past 20 years (see Sabatier 1986 and O'Toole 1986 for contrasting reviews). Finally, Nakamura (1987) and others have noted that the real world process often does not fit the sequence of stages envisaged.

On the other hand, a great deal of

policy research—particularly in the policy process tradition—has been methodologically sophisticated and guided by explicit theory. Examples would include Kingdon (1984) and Nelson (1984) on agenda-setting; Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Rodgers and Bullock (1976), Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981, 1989), and Goggin (1987) on implementation; Browning et al (1984) on long-term policy change; and Ostrom (1990) on institutional arrangements for managing common property resources. In short, while the criticisms of Eulau and Landau were largely justified in the 1970s, they are less valid today.

None of these sources of strain should pose serious obstacles to close collaboration between “mainline” political scientists and the subfield of policy scholars. Both groups share an overwhelming common interest in developing a better understanding of the policy process, i.e. the range of factors which affect governmental policy decisions and the impacts of those decisions on society. Since at least the first part of that process has traditionally been the domain of political science, the subfield of policy scholars clearly have an interest in keeping abreast of developments in the rest of the discipline. By the same token, policy scholars can take pride in having made major contributions to our understanding of the functioning of governmental institutions which should be of interest to all political scientists, even those with no particular concerns with policy impacts.

## Preview of the Symposium

During the 1970s, the stages heuristic served to focus attention on a number of neglected aspects of the policy process, particularly agenda-setting and implementation. This symposium synthesizes advances made during the 1980s toward the development of several causal theories of the policy process.

In the initial essay, I first identify a number of areas in which policy scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of that process: the importance of intergovernmental policy subsystems, the role of substantive policy information,

the importance of elites vis-a-vis the public, etc. I then summarize four promising theories of the policy process which integrate many of these features with political scientists' traditional knowledge of specific institutions and types of political behavior. These include (1) the open systems (or funnel of causality) model of Richard Hofferbert (1974); (2) an institutional rational choice approach developed by Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues; (3) John Kingdon's (1984) "policy streams" approach; and (4) my own "advocacy coalition" framework (Sabatier 1988).

The remainder of the symposium consists of attempts to critically apply several of these theories to two different policy areas. In the first, Hank Jenkins-Smith applies the institutional rational choice and advocacy coalition models to the study of nuclear waste policy over the past 15 years. This is largely a "scoping" exercise which identifies the types of information required to thoroughly test each model. He concludes that institutional rational choice is very useful for understanding specific battles over institutional arrangements, but very difficult to apply in complex controversies over extended periods of time. In contrast, the advocacy coalition framework is useful for understanding the general evolution of political conflicts over a decade or more, but testing the theory's assumptions about belief change in the past is very difficult.

Joe Stewart applies the same two models to an understanding of efforts to enhance equal educational opportunity (particularly for blacks) over the past several decades.<sup>2</sup> In his view, institutional rational choice is useful in understanding the dynamics of stable, one-coalition subsystems and the strategies developed by the NAACP to abolish segregated schools, while the advocacy coalition approach is helpful in understanding the more complex, dynamic politics after 1960. Stewart also identifies several limitations of each approach.

Hopefully this symposium will stimulate other scholars to apply these (and other) models of the policy process to a variety of policy areas in the United States and elsewhere. It is only through the accumulation of such studies over time

that the strengths and limitations of various approaches can be identified.

## Notes

The participants would like to express their thanks to Robert Hauck for shepherding this symposium to publication and to Ken Meier for accepting responsibility for all errors of fact, interpretation, and logic.

1. This criticism is less valid for Anderson (1975). His first two chapters discuss a variety of socio-economic conditions and types of actors which affect the policy process, and he briefly reviews several approaches. But nowhere does he elaborate one or more frameworks and then seek to apply it/them throughout the book. Ripley (1985) proposes a somewhat similar framework, although his arguments derive primarily from Lowi's arenas of power.

On the other hand, the stages heuristic—which distinguishes a major policy decision, such as a statute, from what emerges in the implementation and reformulation stages—is one means of dealing with several of the problems mentioned by Greenberg et al (1977).

2. The original intent was *not* to have both authors apply the same two models. But, in dealing with their cases, they simply found these two to be the most useful—at least given time and page constraints.

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Any theory of the manner in which governmental policies get formulated and implemented, as well as the effects of those actions on the world, requires an understanding of the behavior of major types of governmental institutions (legislatures, courts, administrative agencies, chief executives), as well as the behavior of interest groups, the general public, and the media. The dominant paradigm of the policy process, the stages heuristic popularized by Jones (1970), Anderson (1975), and Peters (1986), has outlived its usefulness and must be replaced, in large part because it is not a causal theory. In the course of their empirical work, policy scholars have highlighted a number of phenomena that need to be incorporated into theories of the policy process. The development of such theories requires an integration of both political scientists' knowledge of specific institutions and behavior and policy scholars' attention to policy communities, substantive policy information, etc.

### Innovations by Policy Scholars in Understanding the Policy Process

At least since World War II, most political scientists have tended to focus on either a specific type of institution (legislatures, the presi-

dency, courts, interest groups, administrative agencies, local governments, political parties) or on specific types of political behavior outside those institutions (public opinion, voting, political socialization). These have become the standard subfields within the discipline.

In contrast, scholars interested in public policy have not been able to stay within these subfields because the policy process spans all of them. In the course of empirical work, policy scholars have highlighted a number of phenomena often neglected by political scientists without a policy focus:

- The importance of policy communities/networks/subsystems involving actors from numerous public and private institutions and from multiple levels of government;
- The importance of substantive policy information;
- The critical role of policy elites vis-a-vis the general public;
- The desirability of longitudinal studies of a decade or more;
- Differences in political behavior across policy types.

### The Importance of Intergovernmental Policy Communities/Subsystems

Traditionally, political scientists

have been preoccupied with either a single type of institution or with "iron triangles" at a single level of government. The separate, and neglected, field of intergovernmental relations has focused on legal relationships and political culture (Elazar 1984).

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Numerous strands of policy research have demonstrated the inadequacy of this focus on single, or small groups of, institutions. Virtually all implementation research, from the early studies of Murphy (1973), Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), and Van Horn (1979) to more recent work by Hjern and Porter (1981), Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981, 1989), Scholz and Wei (1986), and Goggin (1987) has demonstrated that the development and execution of domestic policy in the United States and Western Europe involves numerous agencies and interest groups at